



**University of
Zurich**^{UZH}

**Zurich Open Repository and
Archive**

University of Zurich
University Library
Strickhofstrasse 39
CH-8057 Zurich
www.zora.uzh.ch

Year: 2013

**Review of Elizabeth Donnelly Carney Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon: a
royal life: women in antiquity**

Bartels, Jens

Posted at the Zurich Open Repository and Archive, University of Zurich
ZORA URL: <https://doi.org/10.5167/uzh-84969>
Journal Article

Originally published at:

Bartels, Jens (2013). Review of Elizabeth Donnelly Carney Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon: a royal life: women in antiquity. Bryn Mawr Classical Review:online.

[BMCR 2013.09.54](#) on the BMCR blog

Bryn Mawr Classical Review 2013.09.54

Elizabeth Donnelly Carney, *Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon: A Royal Life. Women in antiquity.* Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. xvii, 215. ISBN 9780195365511. \$27.95 (pb).

Reviewed by Jens Bartels, Universität Zürich (jens.bartels@hist.uzh.ch)

[Preview](#)

Writing a biography is a difficult task, all the more when the object of study is a person of antiquity. Evidence is usually scarce, fragmentary and distorted. Thus, reconstructing an ancient life from birth to death, even tracing the protagonist's character or at least his / her motives, seems quite impossible. More often than not, the situation is additionally exacerbated by the lack of an ancient biography or the absence of a dense historiographical tradition. As this is exactly the case with Arsinoë II, one wonders, how one could try and write a biography about her. The (very aesthetic) design of the cover of the book by Olivia Russin could be a hint at the difficulties: the upper half shows a wonderful early Hellenistic bronze head of a woman. It may depict Arsinoë II, but also Arsinoë I or any other Hellenistic queen of that time, or simply a goddess.¹ In order to be able to relate the life of Arsinoë II one has to squeeze every bit of evidence to the last drop and is still far from any continuous narration on her life let alone any hints on her motivation or her character. Of course, Elizabeth Carney is well aware of these problems. In the appendix (137-145) she thus presents a concise and critical survey of the relevant sources and the related scholarly discussion, showing the rather desperate situation. In her own words (10): "Looking at Arsinoë's life is a bit like trying to meet someone at a big party, but somehow always missing them though, perhaps, getting a whiff of their perfume and hearing a lot of stories about them. In a sense, Arsinoë is always in the other room."

Does this book, then, intend to be a biography? The series in which Carney's book is published proclaims to provide "compact and accessible introductions to the life and historical times of women from the ancient world" (cf. the series title on the front flyleaf). This sounds less restricted, yet both the blurb on the back cover and Carney herself in the introduction (9) speak of the book as being a biography. The structure of the book also seems to be designed along the narrative structure of a biography. After an Introduction (1-10) the main chapters deal with Arsinoë's background and youth (11-30), her life as wife of king Lysimachus (31-48), her relations with Ptolemy Ceraunus (49-64), her return to Egypt and the marriage to her brother Ptolemy II (65-82), her life as wife of Ptolemy II (83-105) and finally her afterlife (106-133). A short annotated list of the most important persons dealing with Arsinoë mentioned in the book (135-136), the aforementioned appendix on "Sources and Assessment of Arsinoë II's Career" (137-145), a glossary (179-180), an ample bibliography (181-201) and an index (203-215) complete a well crafted and pleasing book.

The aim of a biographic narrative contributes to the weaker passages of this otherwise interesting book. As already mentioned, the problem is the scanty

evidence: the year of Arsinoë's birth (around 318-314 B.C.) is a mere reconstruction from the assumed date of her marriage to Lysimachus (ca. 300 B.C.); we know nothing about her life before this marriage and there is still an ongoing debate about the date of her death. Even for Arsinoë's life up to her third marriage with her brother Ptolemy around 276/275 B.C. we have not much more than late and distorted scraps of rather hostile tradition providing some sidelights onto dynastic troubles. From then onward we possess ample evidence for Arsinoë, but it only concerns royal self-representation and sometimes the reactions of people under Ptolemaic rule. As a result, the aim of writing a biography about Arsinoë II seems beyond reach. Indeed, Carney too often has to turn to speculation to fill the needs of biographic narrative. As Carney is aware of this and carefully avoids presenting speculation as knowledge, this leads to rather unpleasant clusters of "she might have", "she must have" and so on (e.g. 61-63; 88). Although personally, I sometimes am more sceptical about the question whether evidence is reliable enough for this or that interpretation (e. g. 60-61; 89-90), in using ancient evidence Carney steers a reasonable course. She sides more with Stanley Burstein's sceptical view on the image of Arsinoë as a 'tigress queen', but warns against rewriting her as a "sort of royal housewife" (144).

Furthermore, *Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon* is an interesting and enriching book. Carney achieves this by filling the gaps of our knowledge on Arsinoë with concise and insightful information on early Hellenistic history, Hellenistic monarchy, the Ptolemies, royal self-representation and the role of women at royal courts (e.g. 11-16; 17-29; 31-35; 66-70; 83-87; 91-97). Being one of the greatest specialists in the field of early Hellenistic history and especially the role of royal women during this period, Carney is here at her best. The book would have been even better if she had sometimes avoided the constraints of the biographic genre and kept more strictly to the idea of an "introduction to the lives and historical times".

In summary, Carney's book is a useful contribution to the ongoing discussion about Arsinoë II² and an important enhancement of the only other biographic effort on Arsinoë, by Gabriela Longega.³

Notes:

1. Cf. Carney's illuminating remarks pp. 116-117.

2. Cf. inter alia R. A. Hazzard, *Imagination of a monarchy: Studies in Ptolemaic propaganda*, Toronto 2000 and S. Müller, *Das hellenistische Königspaar in der medialen Repräsentation*, Berlin/New York 2009.

3. G. Longega, *Arsinoë II*, Roma 1968.

[Read comments on this review or add a comment](#) on the BMCR blog

Home	Read Latest	Archives	BMCR Blog	About BMCR	Review for BMCR	Commentaries	Support BMCR
----------------------	-----------------------------	--------------------------	---------------------------	----------------------------	---------------------------------	------------------------------	------------------------------

BMCR, Bryn Mawr College, 101 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr, PA 19010